Found Sounds

The musical visionary Tod Machover has crowd-sourced a symphony for Tucan, and now other cities want one, too.

By Sue Carter Flinn

In early 2011, Peter Oundjian, the music director for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, enlisted Tod Machover to compose a piece for this year’s New Creations Festival, a week dedicated to contemporary orchestral music. The theme for this event was technology and the orchestra, and Oundjian wanted something that wouldn’t have been possible a decade ago. The 59-year-old Machover is a Boston-based musical innovator who believes that with the right technology, even those who skipped the childhood ritual of piano lessons or who are cursed with a tin ear can create a piece worthy of a concert hall. He came up with an ambitious plan to merge public contributions into an orchestral composition. It’s called A Toronto Symphony, and it premiers this month—a half-hour piece that incorporates thousands of sounds submitted by ordinary Torontonians, sounds that are meant to represent everyday experiences of the city.

It’s the kind of idea most would abandon at the “Wouldn’t it be cool…” stage. Machover, however, is a true believer. As a professor of music and tech at the MIT Media Lab, a play- ground for interdisciplinary researchers, Machover has dedicated his life to the idea of making composition and performance accessible to the masses. “Creativity isn’t something just for geniuses or some small number of people,” he says. He’s sought after speaker who can deliver a fast-TED talk with the assurance of Malcolm Gladwell and the geeky intensity of Bill Gates. He invented HyperScore, a software program that allows amateurs to compose music using colour-coded graphics. Yo-Yo Ma, Price, and Peter Gabriel have employed Machover-engineered Hyper-instruments, which allow performers to create multi-layered sounds normally available only in the studio. For the

magicians who need to, he built a special Hyperinstrument-enhanced chair that makes music based on the movements of the person sitting in it. Machover is also the grandaddy of Guitar Hero, which employs technology that came out of his MIT lab.

His creative evangelism is bred in the bone—his first music teacher was his mother; a Juilliard-trained pianist who encouraged him to create tunes using the sounds of household objects. His father was a pioneer in computer graphics. Machover first got

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to know Toronto in the ‘70s while serving as principal of a school in the Canadian Opera Company’s touring orchestra—he would drive up from New York, where he was studying composition. Over the past few decades, reams of sounds around the world, including the London Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Houston Grand Opera and the Kronos Quartet, have commissioned work from him. (As did the renowned Toronto Piano Quartet, for which Oundjian once served as a first violinist.) His most recent opera, Death and the Power, employed a chorus of robots and an animated stage, and was a finalist for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize.

After beginning work on the new symphony, Machover went public last spring with a small array of challenges posted on the project’s website: Twitter page and Facebook page, asking the public for samples of everyday city sounds. He received hundreds of examples of phone chimes, streetcar siren, and construction sounds. He also won an Foo-Funding walk- ing tour of the city, making field recordings in Cherry Beach, the Distillery District and Chinatown and on the TTC. (He worked with members of the TSO to convert many of these sounds into musical notation; others have been jury-scored and is due to the final work to add texture and color.)

Throughout the fall, he uploaded brief sections of the piece to a group of web applications designed by the MIT Media Lab that allow anyone to manipulate sounds simply by moving the mouse around on the screen. The app are as user-friendly and addictive as Angry Birds. In a series of YouTube videos demonstrating how they work and encouraging people to make and upload their own versions of the partial symphony, Machover comes off like a kids’ show host who is just as psyched to play with the software as he hopes everyone else is.

As he was collecting ideas, he also released teaser clips of the piece. A Toronto Symphony isn’t quite the musical equivalent of a walk down Yonge, but there’s no mistaking its Machoverian enthusiasm—the main melody is lively enough to stand in as an Olympics theme song. One section combines flourishes of stratospheric melodies played by the strings with the noise of a tennis racket, people cheering on a baseball team, burbling water and, amusingly, a male voice shouting, “Walk sign is up for all crossings—the sound of the city’s pedestrian scrambles.

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Oundjian says of Machover’s creation. “Only Tod would think you could create a symphony from thousands of little ideas that come to you via the Internet. A number of other cities have already approached Machover about creating their own versions of A Toronto Symphony. He expects Boston, Edinburgh and Perth, Australia, to premier grand-scale, crowd-sourced musical works beginning as early as this summer, with more to follow.

Bach is alleged to have said there is nothing remarkable about being able to play a keyboard—you just hit the keys and the instrument plays itself. Composing a symphony, however, is quite something: that can be left in the hands of people who can’t tell an adagio from an allegro. Machover himself acknowledges that creating a memorable piece of music is a rare feat. He also doesn’t expect to replace the piano teacher. “You don’t want machines to take over—there are still wonderful things we can do face to face, thank God,” he says. “But if we can shape the technology to allow us to extend our abilities, that’s pretty magical.” The Toronto experiment demonstrates that our most precious creative resource is not necessarily crowds of eager, phone-wielding amateurs, but rather a few imaginative minds set to like Machover who believes: there are better and more fun ways to make music than sitting alone in a room.